

Kantian Grace as Ethical Gymnastics

La gracia de Kant como gimnasia ética

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Abstract

Kant's concept of grace in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* is a difficult topic, exegetically speaking. Obviously enough, Kant subscribes positively to a notion of divine assistance. This appears awkward given his rationalist ethics rooted in personal autonomy. This has given cause to interpreters of Kant's philosophy of religion – both early commentators and today – to read Kant's account of grace as uniquely rationalist. This would make grace a rational expectation given personal commitment to good works. The argument of this paper is that grace is a hyperrationalist element in Kant's practical philosophy because of the potentially problematic consequences of Kant's views of human nature. Human nature is namely not particularly prone to be responsive to the rational moral law and therefore requires a number of pedagogical tools that facilitate moral agency.

Key words

Grace, Irrationalism, Pedagogy, Pessimism.

Shortly after the publication of Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* in 1793, Gottlob Christian Storr (1746-1805) published his notes in Tübingen on Kant's work as

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*Annotationes quaedam theologicae ad philosophicam Kantii de religione doctrinam*¹. Kant planned a reply to Storr but never explicitly delivered on this (6:13). Storr was a conservative theologian that taught at the universities of Tübingen and Stuttgart. He was highly influential at the *Tübinger Stift*, which was a prominent Evangelical college of residence and study which housed many important thinkers of the 19th century such as Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843), Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775–1854), Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) and David Friedrich Strauß (1808–1874). It is no overstatement to say that these individuals were among the most influential of the early 19th century, and all of these were, directly or indirectly, educated by Storr with regard to Kant's philosophy of religion. Storr was an opponent of rationalism and the Enlightenment, which makes it little surprise that he was highly critical of Kant's views of rational religion. Storr read Kant's *Religion* as an attempt to interpret (Christian) religion rationally in order to expose a rational truth at the bottom of Scripture. This way of reading Kant's *Religion* will be engaged in this essay, specifically on the subject of Kant's philosophical view of grace (*Gnade*). In short, I will argue that Kant comes upon a notion of grace in relationship to his moral philosophy, but that this concept of grace is a response to certain pedagogical difficulties relating to a level of irrationalism in human beings. Consequently, Kant upholds a level of irrationalism in grace in order to respond to a certain irrationalism in human beings. Certain aspects of Kant's philosophy of religion can then rightly be read as the progenitor of more Romantic views of religion (e.g. later Schelling, Schopenhauer and Schleiermacher).

But this argument equally implies that a reductively rationalist reading of Kant's philosophy of religion is mistaken because it misses the pedagogical purposes behind rational religion. As any educator will tell you, educating people is about working with some of the more messy aspects of human beings and not really about determinatively overcoming those aspects. This pedagogical function of religion for Kant has been missed because a certain reading, influenced by Storr, which was common in the first half of the 19th century and remains influential today, especially since Allen Wood's *Kant's Moral Religion* (1970)². Its dominance in the early 19th century can be illustrated by means of a similar reading of Kant's philosophy of religion in the work of both Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860) and his personal arch-nemesis Hegel. Schopenhauer distinguishes between two types of metaphysics, namely philosophy and religion. The former is a rational system of thought that has its justification in itself and can be true literally; the latter is a doctrine based upon a revealed truth that can, at best, be true allegorically. The two of these ought not go over into one another: one should not make a religion rational and neither should

¹ References to Kant's works follow the *Akademie Ausgabe*. I provide the number of the volume followed by the page. Translations are taken from *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. For full references, see bibliography.

² After Wood, questions were raised whether or not Kant's position in *Religion* is consistent with regard to critical philosophy as detailed in the three *Critiques* and even whether *Religion* is self-consistent. Gordon Michalson famously locates a number of 'wobbly' aspects of Kant's views of religion that are self-contradictory and at times self-defeating (Michalson 1990 and 1999). For a defense of the consistency of Kant's *Religion*: Palmquist 2000; Firestone and Jacobs 2008).

one make philosophy religious. Kant's rational religion is then a potentially dangerous mixing of philosophy and religion: "So-called philosophy of religion, which, as a kind of Gnostic wisdom, attempts to interpret given religions and to explain what is true *sensu allegorico* through something that is true *sensu proprio*" (Schopenhauer 2011, p. 191 [185]). This is dangerous because "the attempt to found a religion on reason displaces it into the other class of metaphysics, into that which has its validation *in itself*, thus onto foreign soil" (*ibid.*). One should not lay a new foundation for a house that is already erected. This is the first part of a twofold objection Schopenhauer voices against rational religion. The second part of this objection is that when one nevertheless lays a rational foundation for religion one is at risk of mitigating or even removing those elements of (Christian) doctrine that are the most compelling. Christianity has an appeal just because it is irrational or hyperrational. Specifically, Schopenhauer is considering the doctrines of original sin and justification through grace – which obviously are two fairly enigmatic, perhaps even irrational, elements in Christian religion. This is likely the real reason why Schopenhauer opposes rationalism in religion: "The [rationalists] seek to interpret away [*hinauszuexegesieren*] everything specifically Christian; thereby they retain something that is not true either *sensu proprio* or *sensu allegorico*, but rather a mere platitude, virtually Judaism, or at most shallow pelagianism, and, worst of all, base optimism that is entirely foreign to Christianity proper" (*ibid.*, p. 191 [184]).

The second part of Schopenhauer's objection closely approximates Hegel's objection to rational religion. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* of 1827, Hegel is worried that certain processes in natural and historical science, even in philosophy proper, could impede a proper, dialectical approach to religion. This is a twofold process: on the one hand, philosophy only allows religion the content "that the natural light of reason could supply regarding God" and, on the other hand, philosophy interprets religious doctrine with regard to their immanent, rational usefulness (Hegel 2007, p. 156 [66]). Hegel finds especially this latter aspect highly problematic since, through this process, "Christ is dragged down to the level of human affairs, not to the level of the commonplace but still to that of the human, into the sphere of a mode of action of which pagans such as Socrates have also been capable" (*ibid.*, p. 156 [67]). Hegel is particularly worried that the dialectical essence of the Christian notions of revelation and incarnation would be relegated to mere triviality through rationalizing religion – a worry that anticipates Kierkegaard's Existentialism.

Neither Schopenhauer nor Hegel mention Kant explicitly when they criticize a rationalized version of religion. In both cases, this likely stems from the honest respect they felt was due to the Königsberg philosopher. What should nevertheless be surmised from this is that Kant's very project of a rational religion was criticized by both Hegel and Schopenhauer for removing the heart and blood out of (Christian) religion. This complaint continues on after Kant and remains the standard objection to Kant's *Religionsphilosophie*. While there certainly is a distance between Kant's rational religion and Christianity, the view that Kant provides a wholly rationalized version of religion is an overstatement in need of nuance. Kant retained the honesty to see the gaps in rationality and a such

uncovered the need for something of an irrationalism, even though he sought to address this darkness ultimately by means of the architectonics of reason. This is generally true for many central topics in Kant's philosophy of religion such as radical evil, Christology and Ecclesiology. All of these are at danger of being read as uniquely rationalistic but their function within a broader architectonic system of practical morality notwithstanding, they remain at root responses to an irrational need for something beyond rationality. In providing a response to these deeper layers, Kant recognized that rationality by itself does not suffice for human agents.

The present contribution will explore how this general strategy is developed with regard to Kant's notion of grace. The general point will be that there is an irrationalist element to Kantian grace because of a threefold consideration: grace is a pedagogical tool that responds to an underlying layer of moral pessimism; in order to fulfill this function, grace must necessarily consist of certain irrational elements; the pedagogical merit of grace is that it regulates and assuages moral pessimism without dismantling the ground of pessimism. As such, Kant's grace is not totally and reductively rationalist but – not because of any Christian inspiration, as some would say – in certain interesting parts hyperrationalist. If Kant would have provided a purely rationalized concept of grace, he would likely arrive at some sort of a Pelegian concept of grace that connects human effort directly to justification through grace. Through a reading of the three difficulties with respect to the moral ideal in *Religion II*, I have previously argued that Kant does not totally subscribe to a Pelegian point of view when it comes to grace (Vanden Auweele 2014)³. Presently, the focus will be on the so-called antinomy of faith (6:116-124), which will be interpreted by means of relevant sections of the 'Doctrine of Method' in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and certain of Kant's historical/anthropological writings.

The Project of Rational Religion

Kant's overall project in *Religion* is twofold, namely to provide a transcendental deduction of the elements of pure rational religion and to test whether or not Christian religion is in tune with these elements. Traditionally, this twofold project was illustrated by drawing a distinction between 'two experiments' in Kant's *Religion*, a reading guide which Kant clarifies in the second preface (added in 1794 in order to clarify the purpose of his work). The first experiment must necessarily "abstract from all experience" (6:12) and reflect on how "morality thus inevitably leads to religion" (6:6). The second experiment then takes

³ Here, I argued that scholars have generally suggested that Kant either gave a Humanist reinterpretation of Christianity or that Kant was really a closeted atheist. More recently, a new wave of so-called affirmative Kantians aimed to show that there is no fundamental split between Kant's views of religion and Christianity (e.g. Stephen Palmquist, Chris Firestone, Nathan Jacobs). My view is that while Kant might have been influenced by a Lutheran-Pietist view of Christian religion, his views on religion in *Religion* do not interpret Christianity in any way. Instead, Kant aims to provide a transcendental ground for religion (which is then 'rational religion') which can be clothed in historical garments (which is then 'historical religion') in order to countenance the possible despair that can ensue from the ready recognition of the fallibility of human capacities and the strenuous demands of the moral law.

this one step further and proceeds by holding “fragments of [some alleged] revelation, as a *historical system*, up to moral concepts, and see whether it does not lead back to the same pure *rational system* of religion” (6:12).

Whether or not Kant actually intended two experiments has recently received some controversy. Lawrence Pasternack offered a new perspective on this by pointing out that Kant never explicitly intended such a twofold experiment. His mentioning of a ‘second experiment’ (*Versuch*) merely signals that he will make a second attempt (*Versuch* translates naturally as attempt) at testing whether Christian religion is rational (Pasternack 2017). Most of the time when Kant mentions *Versuch*, Kant is merely alluding to ‘attempts’, but, at some times, it gets a more technical meaning closely associated with ‘experiment’. For instance: “Now yet another experiment [*Versuch*] remains open to us: namely, whether pure reason is also to be found in practical use [...]” (A804/B832). At any rate, while one could quibble endlessly about the proper translation and terminology, this point does not touch the hermeneutical strategy in *Religion* which clearly has the twofold project of delineating rational religion and testing whether Christianity is a rational religion.

Without clearly distinguishing between this twofold project, a number of misunderstandings might arise. In their discussion of the second preface, for instance, two seminal studies of *Religion* miss the difference between Kant’s two projects: Jean-Louis Bruch discusses only Kant’s insistence that one should not be familiar with his ethical writings and Josef Bohatec focuses solely on Kant’s suggested unity between Christianity and rational religion (Bruch 1968, pp. 21-22; Bohatec 1966, pp. 34-35). More recently, some commentators believe that Kant’s chief concern in *Religion* is to translate Christian concepts into concepts that may be beneficial for morality and Kant has, therefore, little to no interest in traditional and historical Christianity (Ward 1972, pp. 150-170; Reardon 1988; Hare 1996). Alternatively, some scholars read Kant as providing a revisionary reading of Christian religion: Giovanni Sala argues that Kant’s religion is “a critical revision of one positive, historical religion: Christianity” (Sala 2000, p. 9 – my translation) and Stephen Crites believes that *Religion*’s “four parts offer strictly moral interpretations of original sin, Christology, the coming Kingdom of God [...], and a doctrine of the church” (Crites 2012, p. 550). Stephen Palmquist, Gordon Michalson and Lawrence Pasternack (at one time) offer, however, interesting discussions of both experiments and show what exactly the effect is of that classical Kant scholarship missed this twofold project (Palmquist 2000, pp. 128-135; Michalson 1979, pp. 56-57; Pasternack 2014, pp. 6-9). While originally it was thought that Kant achieved the first experiment in his writings on ethics in the 1780s, the consensus now seems to be that the experiments appear throughout *Religion* – even though there is some discussion where exactly. In my view, if Kant wants to be successful in showing that Christianity is a rational religion, he first has to establish the a priori necessary essence of a rational religion. This is what Kant calls the ‘inner circle’ of religion, namely the bare essence of religion as such. Only after having done so, Kant can indeed investigate whether or not Christianity as a historical aligns well with the pure essence of religion.

This twofold purpose of *Religion* provides a vital reading guide into Kant's purposes throughout this book. His aim is not to interpret Christianity (or any other faith) but to deduce the rational necessity of religion transcendently and only after having established such a universal, merely formal essence of religion, he will explore whether Christianity in fact accords to pure rational religion. In a manner of speaking, after conceptualizing the naked (*blos*) body of religion, he investigates whether the historical garments of Christianity best flatter its essential, inner essence. While Kant clearly believes that there is essential unity between rational religion and Christianity, he does warn that certain historical evolutions in Christianity have not been true to its essential message. This means that Christianity is essentially a rational religion, but that certain interpretations of Christianity have broken away from this essence. Kant's aim is then to propose certain reforms in historical Christianity that would purify Christianity of any elements that conflict with the essence of rational religion. *Religion I* is concerned mainly with the appropriate view of human nature and its natural disposition towards the moral law. Here, Kant argues that humanity is predisposed originally to be good in terms of giving priority to the moral law over its inclinations towards self-love, but humanity has inexplicably fallen from this original goodness and now has incurred a propensity towards evil. In *Religion II*, Kant is concerned with the individual's way of recovering from this evil nature. An individual can do so by adopting the good *Gesinnung*, namely the strong decision, conviction or disposition to persevere in progressing towards moral goodness. A Christian can be strengthened in doing so by the moral example of the Son of God, which "enables him to *believe* and self-assuredly trust that he, under similar temptations and afflictions (so far as these are made the touchstone of that idea), would steadfastly cling to the prototype of humanity and follow this prototype's example in loyal emulation" (6:62). *Religion III* is then concerned with how a society as a whole can progress morally. Here, Kant clearly believes that a merely political community cannot promote moral progress because such a community, on the one hand, aims at promoting legality, not morality and, on the other hand, does not have a legislator that can scrutinize the human heart. Instead, an ethical community, or a church, is best equipped to promote moral progress in humanity.

As illustrated above, there are two aspects to any authentic religion, namely its rational essence and its historical form. For Kant, it is a lamentable but "unavoidable limitation of human reason" that a "historical faith attaches itself to pure religion" (6:115). Human beings do not live merely in the abstract but they formulate, in accordance with certain historically-contingent beliefs and superstitions, certain concrete aspects of being religious. This means that certain not-necessarily-rational elements naturally latch unto to religion as such. To illustrate, a rational religion promotes the idea of a moral ideal, which is a 'son of God' that sets a moral example to follow. While Kant never mentions Jesus Christ by name, the Christian Messiah is a good example of the rational ideal of moral perfection. The possible reason why Kant foregoes from naming Jesus Christ likely is related to his general objective to undo religion of its unnecessary elements. Whether or

not this ‘son of God’ has any specific characteristics such as a name, a place of birth, a heritage, certain bodily features or has any of the specifics of any life, is ultimately of very little concern. In a letter to Jacobi at one point, Kant clarifies that what is most important in the idea of a ‘son of God’ is the universal, ahistorical idea of Christ, while the Evangelical or historical account – or even the historical origin of that idea – is a side-issue (*Nebensache*) of little relevance (11:76). Indeed, the specifics of the moral example only serve to distract or even impede its moral function for Kant. For instance, the adulation of Jesus Christ could lead towards the idea that Christ is operative in the human agent’s salvation, thereby downplaying the extent of humanity’s autonomous moral duty⁴.

This is why Kant suggests a twofold strategy of dealing with the historical garments of religion: on the one hand, (Christian) faith is to be reformed so that the historical aspects are in tune with rational religion and, on the other hand, (Christian) faith is to progress on the path of becoming “pure religious faith until finally we can dispense of that vehicle” (6:115). This means that Christianity is to be aligned with rational religion for the time that the historical garments remain a necessary commodity for believers who need historical mediation for rational religion. It is doubtful whether Kant actually believed that such a state could in fact be reached. At one point, Kant expresses the hope that

historical faith, which, as ecclesiastical, needs a holy book to guide human beings but, precisely for this reason, hinders the church’s unity and universality, will itself cease and pass over into a pure religious faith which illumines whole world equally; and we should diligently work for it even now, through the continuous development of the pure religion of reason out of its present still indispensable shell (6:135n).

Kant added to this, in the second edition of *Religion*, that his hope is that historical faith “can cease” and not that it “will cease” (*Ibid.*). As such, he clearly believes that human nature might be too fragile ever completely to dispense of historical faith, but that historical faith itself should be of such a nature that it naturally relegates itself to the pure religion of reason.

This general strategy might incline a reading of Kant’s philosophy of religion wherein any elements of historical faith that are not purely rational are to be dismissed. This does not seem to be the case, however. The idea that historical religion has to be aligned with the rational essence of religion, does not imply that such a historical religion has to be entirely rational. In fact, certain functions of rational religion *require* a reference to something irrational, and certain irrationalist elements of religion cannot be abandoned. This topic is most explicitly addressed when Kant discusses topics that border on pure rational religion, but do not entirely belong to the inner circle of religion. In other words, these are elements of historical religion that are necessary elements of rational religion. These are indeed rather awkward and are prone to give rise to charges of inconsistency in Kant’s *Religion*. What is to be made of religion’s irrational aspects that necessarily belong to rational religion? The ambivalence of this topic explains Kant’s own hesitations when

⁴ For further discussion of this topic: Pasternack 2012, pp. 30-52; Palmquist 2012, pp. 421-437.

discussing the *parerga* to rational faith, namely effects of grace, miracles, mysteries and means of grace. Kant's introduction of these is telling:

These are, as it were, *parerga* to religion within the boundaries of pure [*reinen*] reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it [*stoßen doch an sie an*]. Reason, conscious of its impotence [*Unvermögens*] to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to extravagant ideas [*überschwenglichen Ideen*] which might make up for this lack, though it is not suited to this enlarged domain. Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action (6:52).

Two of the terms in this quote are of particular importance, namely 'impotence' and 'extravagant ideas'. The original German terms have been provided because translation is key. Especially the adjective in the latter term is subject to controversy. It is variously translated as 'extravagant' (Di Giovanni), 'high-flown' (Greene and Hudson) or 'boundless' (Palmquist). The connotation in the German original suggests that the ideas are excessive and therefore unnerving at the same time. While one would expect this to carry a negative connotation in Kant's rational religion, these 'extravagant' ideas are introduced by Kant as necessary bordering concepts of rational religion that do not wholly belong to the inner sphere of religion, but without which rational religion cannot function. This already signals that there is a necessary addendum to rational religion which leads to some more high-flown, extravagant or boundless ideas. Grace is one of these.

Moral Service and Grace

The specifics of a rational religion of reason ought to be specified further in order to better understand the irrationalist elements in a proper understanding of grace. While one could make this argument from the difficulties relating to Kant's Christology in *Religion II*, we will focus on the 'antinomy of faith' in *Religion III*. Kant sets the stage by making a distinction between a 'saving faith' (*seligmachende Glaube*) and a 'slavish faith' (*gottesdienstliche Glaube*). The former is based upon morality, the latter is based on cultic service to God (6:115-116). This means that the former aims to instill a disposition of dutiful morality while the latter promotes the idea that one can be saved through certain amoral (or even immoral!) services to a deity:

The one faith fancies to please God through actions (of *cultus*) which (though laborious) yet possess no moral worth in themselves, hence are actions extracted only through fear or hope, the kind which also an evil human being can perform, whereas for that the other faith presupposes as necessary a morally good disposition (6:115-116).

Any reader familiar with Kant's writings on morality would naturally assume that a 'saving faith' is occupied solely with good life conduct. According to *Groundwork* and the *second Critique*, a moral agent acts out of respect (*Achtung*) for a self-prescribed, autonomous moral duty. While these duties derive from the self-legislation of noumenal

rationality, the human agent is allowed to perceive “all moral duties as divine commands” in order to add to the psychological appeal of these duties (5:129; 6:230). But Kant’s point in *Religion* goes beyond his point in *second Critique* (and *third Critique*), namely in pointing out how a saving faith necessarily has another component next to autonomy, namely grace. A saving faith promotes, on the one hand, good life conduct in order to be well-pleasing to God and, on the other hand, a faith in satisfaction or justification insofar as one exhausts one’s capacities. The two belong together necessarily, which means that a saving faith cannot dispense of either autonomy or grace.

This sudden and somewhat unexpected point appears paradoxical and Kant does not lack the honesty to recognize that this is a “remarkable antinomy of human reason” (6:116). This antinomy wonders whether or not historical faith is “an essential portion of saving faith” (*Ibid.*). While at first seemingly unrelated to the question of the relationship between grace and autonomy, this antinomy goes to the heart of a troubling paradox in Kantian philosophy. The paradox reads as follows. On the one hand, Kant allies to a strong interpretation of human depravity. When Kant describes his moral anthropology and the reach of human depravity in *Religion I*, he seems more of the mindset of Luther than Erasmus in their famous debate on the freedom of the will⁵. Depravity does not touch the autonomy of the human power of choice, but it does deprive human beings of a natural incentive towards the moral law. Luther would say that the human being is nothing but Flesh, while Erasmus argued that human nature remains in some ways redolent of original goodness. This means that morality is superimposed upon human nature and does not emerge from human nature. In Kantian language, there is no sensible hospitality to the moral law: “There is no antecedent feeling in the subject that would be attuned to morality: that is impossible, since all feeling is sensible whereas the incentive of the moral disposition must be free from any sensible condition” (5:75). The moral law and our incentive to respond to that law (respect) is superimposed through noumenal rationality and is not born from human nature. This way of thinking about the relationship between human nature and the moral law does, in turn, explain why morality remains always a duty, rather than an inclination. Through lacking a natural incentive towards morality, the interest in morality is generated in the confrontation with the moral law. Luther would similarly point out that human beings are only informed and interested in God and morality through revelation, not through their nature.

This radical interpretation of human, natural depravity is one side of the coin. On the other hand, Kant emphasizes that moral duties are duties of autonomy for which any individual is uniquely responsible. Human beings are the first and only protagonists in their justification and salvation. As such, Kant seems to be leaning in the direction of a Pelagian concept of soteriology wherein good works by themselves suffice for justification. Fleshing out the purpose of grace in this soteriology is key to understanding properly Kant’s rational religion.

⁵ For an extensive discussion of this claim: Vanden Auweele 2013, pp. 117-134.

The tension between both sides of the coin was signaled powerfully by Gordon Michalson, who notes how Kant's account of depravity "appears to force him in an Augustinian direction, while his conception of grace or divine aid reintroduces an obviously Pelagian element based on human effort and merit. The resulting position [...] is not so much incoherent as it is unstable" (Michalson 1990, p. 97). While Michalson's observation is astute, there is a more charitable reading possible of the interplay between grace and good works in Kant's philosophy. This reading suggests that one must necessarily model Kant's language of grace within the strictures of his pessimistic view of human nature. Many commentators fall in either of the following pitfalls. Either one stresses the decisive role of moral works and then relegates Kant to a Pelagian⁶ or one stresses the profound challenge radical evil poses to Kant's ethics and one is consequently is forced to read his account as more or less Christian, i.e. not (entirely) based on merit⁷.

Kant addresses this tension explicitly in the remarkable antinomy of reason – sometimes called the 'antinomy of faith' – in *Religion III* (6:116-123). An antinomy is a conflict of reason with itself because of two propositions that appear equally plausible but mutually exclude one another. On the one hand, Kant argues that "*the pure moral faith must take precedence over the ecclesiastical*" (6:117). This means that the necessary condition under which ecclesiastical faith might take positive effect is good life conduct. Kant's argument for this position is *a contrario*, namely that no rational human being could consent to the view that he merely has "to believe the news of a satisfaction having been rendered to him, and (as the jurists say) accept it *utiliter*, in order to regard his guilt as done away with" (6:116). To Kant, it appears genuinely absurd that a human being that has not made moral progress by himself could believe that good life conduct would be "the unavoidable consequence of his faith and his acceptance of the proffered belief" (6:117). To put it bluntly, this would be a grace without merit. On the other hand, Kant argues that "faith in a merit which is not [the believer's] own, but through which he is reconciled with God, would therefore have to precede any striving for good works" (6:117). This is so because insofar as man is conscious of the fact of his bondage to the evil principle (the *Hang zum Böse*), he is without "capacity in him sufficient to improve things in the future" (6:117). If a human being would have any hope of being justified before God and for the first time capable of good life conduct, then something must happen that is necessarily outside of the capacity of the depraved human being.

This is the antinomy of faith: does good life conduct necessarily precede faith or does faith necessarily precede good life conduct? With the exception of the mathematical antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant's default solution when faced with an antinomy consists in validating both sides of the equation from different points of view. These points of view are the phenomenal and noumenal perspective. The ultimate

⁶ Numerous authors have made this claim in some way, including Barth 1969, p. 187; Wood 1970, p. 197n. Bohatec 1966, p. 337; Michalson 1990, p. 76. Others have emphasized that Kant's soteriology is a 'light' version of Pelagianism: Byrne 2007, pp. 139–52; Bruch 1968, p. 105n.

⁷ This point is made, in very different ways, by these authors: Pasternack 2012; Palmquist 2010; Firestone and Jacobs 2008; Mariña 1997; Hare 1996.

argument is then that good life conduct and faith basically boil down to the same thing. The effect of faith in the Son of God is good life conduct:

The living faith in the [archetype] of a humanity well-pleasing to God (the Son of God) refers, *in itself*, to a moral idea of reason, insofar as the latter serves for us not only as a guideline but as incentive as well; it is, therefore, all the same whether I start out from it (as *rational* faith) or from the principle of good life conduct (6:119).

Insofar as the archetype of moral perfection appears in empirical form, what Kant calls the ‘God-man’ but most Christians naturally think of Jesus Christ, there can be somewhat of a distance between faith in the example (*Vorbild*) of the archetype (*Urbild*). This is due to a tendency in human beings to elevate the clothing of religion over its rational message. Therefore, human beings come up with various amoral ways of paying homage to the God-man by which they become so-called true followers. Indeed, Kant recognizes that “it is arduous to be a good *servant* (here one always hears only talk of duties); hence the human being would rather be a *favorite*” (6:200). In turn, this also explains Kant’s sincere hesitations with regard to historical faith since this is the ground and cause of significant moral waywardness. Therefore, Kant expresses the hope that in the end religion “will gradually be freed of all empirical grounds of determination” (6:121). Authentic religion, however, emphasizes good life conduct as the only means of becoming pleasing to God. On this, Kant is categorical:

There is no other means (nor can there be any) by which to become worthy of heavenly assistance, except the earnest endeavor to improve his moral nature in all possible ways, thereby making himself capable of receiving a nature fully fit – as is not in his power – for divine approval, since the expected divine assistance itself has only his morality for its aim (6:192).

As such, for a rational religion the idea of the God-man (the example of a ‘Son of God’), simply serves to reinforce moral motivation. This means that faith in grace is ultimately equal to a tool that empowers moral courage, nothing more.

Grace and Moral Pedagogy

In order to unpack and clarify Kant’s very dense argument with regard to faith in grace in *Religion III*, it is vital to address the overarching purpose of his philosophy of religion. Up to this point, Kant has recognized that (1) morality necessarily extends towards a pure rational religion, (2) human beings require rational religion to be clothed into a historical faith, (3) authentic historical faith is attuned to pure rational religion, (4) the cause of moral waywardness can often be attributed to elevating historical faith over rational religion and (5) faith in the Son of God is a companion to good life conduct.

From the above, it should be clear – especially from point (2) and (5) – that rational religion necessarily extends to certain not purely rational notions, mostly because of

human finitude. This means that it is concern for some of the unique characteristics of human beings that forces Kant to supplement pure practical morality with, what Robert Louden calls, an ‘impure ethics’ (Louden 2000). These are then concerns for, broadly speaking, human education – or, as it would be called in the 19th century, *Bildung* (cultivation). The primary figures of inspiration of this new view of education (closely associated with Romanticism) were Kant and Rousseau. Through some of their innovations, children were no longer perceived as ‘savages in need of culture’ (against which Rousseau could be taken to argue) or ‘blank slates’ (against which Kant could be taken to argue). Instead, educational institutions progressively realized that students had a remarkable level of autonomy that ought to be nourished appropriately. The task of education was not to use the same standard for every individual but to cultivate their inner potential. Indeed, while the traditional way of thinking about education as *Erziehung* implicated the student only as the receptacle of instruction, the new idea of *Bildung* could only be achieved through the participation of the student. While Herder, Schiller and Goethe were among the major figures who propagated this new ideal approach to education, the figure most readily associated with this new innovation is Wilhelm von Humboldt (even though Humboldt’s writings on education were only published some time after his death). Gradually, education was less concerned with imparting knowledge as such, but rather with edifying and cultivating character.

This new approach to education that will become increasingly influential throughout the 19th century was foreshadowed by some of Kant’s insights into education. In the ‘Doctrine of Method of Pure Practical Reason’ of the *second Critique*, Kant addresses an issue he had without success addressed in *Groundwork* III, namely “the way in which one can provide the laws of pure practical reason with *access* to the human mind and *influence* on its maxims, that is, the way in which one can make objectively practical reason *subjectively* practical as well” (5:151). By this issue, Kant does not mean to take back any of his rigor in arguing for rational respect as the only genuinely moral incentive. Instead, Kant ponders how “pure virtue can have *more power* over the human mind [...] than all the deceptive allurements of enjoyment” (5:151). Human beings are imperfect and embodied rational agents that require assistance in building up to pure morality. Kant even goes so far as to suggest that “a mind that is still uncultivated or one that is degraded onto the track of the morally good” might need “some preparatory guidance” (5:152). This initial guidance can even consist of immoral practices – such as the treat of harm as motivators for proper legal agency – as long as these practices lead human beings to a legally proper course of action. When human beings are accustomed, however, to the legal proper course of action, then the pure moral incentive must be brought forward. As such, Kant recognizes that the human agent that is averse to pure morality will never be convinced by an appeal to rationality alone. These amoral and immoral practices that would promote legality can enlighten human beings about their own dignity, and so provide the resources to “tear himself away from all sensible attachments so far as they want to rule over him and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he makes in the

independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to which he sees that he is called” (5:152). In an Aristotelian spirit, Kant would even recommend habituation to moral virtue (5:154).

This point of view is confirmed by the *Lectures on Pedagogy* (9:486-499), but Kant draws up a slightly more nuanced view of moral education in the ‘Doctrine of the Methods of Ethics’ in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Here, Kant distinguishes between a moral catechism and a moral ascetics/gymnastics. The former is a Socratic conversation wherein the educator awakens the student to the proper propositions and content of practical reason; the latter is the whole of practices, symbols and ideas that aim to promote a mindset wherein one is capable of “combatting natural impulses sufficiently to be able to master them when a situation comes up in which they threaten morality; hence it makes one valiant and cheerful in the consciousness of one’s restored freedom” (6:487). In slightly less Kantian terminology, one aspect of moral education aims at instilling moral courage wherein one is trained to remain upright when faced with adversity.

Kant signals clearly that his concern with rational religion and especially the concept of grace is one of education, specifically moral gymnastics. Nearing the close of *Religion I*, Kant has built up to a remarkable tension between human capacities and the extent of human duties. Slightly bombastically, Kant suggest that how “a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being surpasses every concept of ours. For how can an evil tree bear good fruit?” (6:44-45). Since the propensity to evil reaches into the roots (*radix*) of human volition, one cannot expect this tree to bear good fruits. Therefore, Kant notes that a certain germ of goodness must remain in the human being that would lead him to moral betterment, which is the predisposition to goodness. But this moral betterment cannot happen through gradual improvement! Instead, this must be a “*revolution* in the disposition of the human being” (6:47). Elsewhere, Kant similarly emphasizes that “the end of religious instruction must be to make us other human beings and not merely better human beings” (7:54). Whether or not this revolution has taken place necessarily remains inscrutable since we lack introspection⁸. Therefore, human beings must be jolted into exhausting their own capacities in order to reform their propensity to evil.

At this critical juncture of Kant’s argument, Kant divulges that the essence of rational religion and the concept of grace is moral education (*Bildung*): “From this it follows that a human being’s moral education [*Bildung*] must begin, not with an improvement of mores, but with the transformation of his attitude of mind and the

⁸ E.g.: “The depths of the human heart are unfathomable [*unergründlich*]. Who knows himself well enough to say, when he feels the incentive to fulfill his duty, whether it proceeds entirely from the representation of the law or whether there are not many other sensible impulses contributing to it that look to one’s advantage (or to avoiding what is detrimental) and that, in other circumstances, could just as well serve vice?” (6:447) or in *Religion* as: “Assurance of this [making moral progress] cannot of course be attained by the human being naturally, neither via immediate consciousness nor via the evidence of the life he has hitherto led, for the depths of his own heart (the subjective first ground of his maxims) are to him inscrutable” (6:51); “Indeed, even a human being’s inner experience of himself does not allow him so to fathom the depths of his heart as to be able to attain, through self-observation, an entirely reliable cognition of the basis of the maxims which he professes, and of their purity and stability” (6:63).

establishment of a character” (6:48; see also 8:116). This means that moral education does not attack individual vices, but provides a character that remains upright in the face of temptation, not by ousting temptation, but rather by cultivating a character that is valiant in the face of temptation. In a nutshell, this is what has been described above a moral gymnastics, which is a process that necessarily extends to impure, irrational (sometimes even immoral) practices in order to appropriately facilitate moral courage.

The downside of this argument is that these practices – some religious, some secular – are not embraced for their truthfulness, rather for their beneficial effect. As Allen Wood has shown, Kantian moral faith is a lot like Pascal’s wager since it does not “try to show that Christianity is true, but that Christian belief would be advantageous to have” (Wood 1970, pp. 160-161). Pascal, however, recognized the limits of such a prudential embrace of Christian faith. In fact, Pascal knew that prudential considerations do not sway the unbeliever’s heart. When one has recognized the intellectual merit of Christian faith, one must debase (*abêtir*) oneself through ritual practice in order to render the mind porous to Christian faith. As did the Jesuits of Pascal’s day believe, the practice of ritual repetition can incite one to forget the prudential reason for turning to Christian faith and make one a true believer. Kant does not assign such redemptive qualities to ritual repetition. Instead, Kant merely points out the benefits of an embrace of Christian religion without providing any overriding reasons to convince the unbeliever – with the possible exception that atheism might remove certain incentives to progress morally (5:453).

A related downside to Kant’s argument is that religious notions and practices, such as grace but others can be included as well, lose their uniqueness and become replaceable⁹. This means that there might be other, non-religious practices that can equally serve the purpose of encouraging moral courage, through which religion would become a replaceable assistant to morality. Two examples can be helpful. First, Kant points out in a number of places that a proper civil constitution can induce moral behavior: “The good moral education (*Bildung*) is to be expected from a good state constitution” (ZcF 8:366). While a good constitution cannot provide the motivation for moral agency (which can only be rational respect), such a constitution can assist in making moral behavior easier. A civil society in which all sorts of vices are permitted or even encouraged would indeed make morality far more difficult. Second, the beautiful in art can be a symbol for morality (5:351-354). Moral goodness and beauty are similar since, like the moral law, the beautiful legislates for itself: the beautiful is what announces itself spontaneously, rather than conforming to a prior concept of the beautiful. Through exposure to the beautiful, the moral fiber of human beings can be strengthened. Indeed, when one inhabits a world that is beautiful, that beauty can make one more like to act morally. In criminological theory, this is confirmed by the so-called ‘Broken windows-theory’, which suggests that criminal and antisocial behavior is reinforced by an urban situation full of disorder and vandalism¹⁰.

⁹ This was one of the main reasons why theologians objected to Kant’s philosophy of religion in the 19th century. For an overview: : Zachhuber 2013.

¹⁰ The theory is based upon the following article: Wilson and Kelling 1982.

This theory was put to the test in, among others, New York in the late 80s and proved effective: crime declined after a serious investment in public works fixed broken windows, removed graffiti, etc. Kant's aesthetics suggests something similar: legal and moral behavior is facilitated by the experience of the beautiful.¹¹ These points show that an authentically moral religion, a proper civil constitution and a beautiful environment are not strictly speaking moral, but can facilitate moral behavior.

Conclusion

Kant's philosophy of religion tries to deal with the mess that is humanity. Human beings are naturally ill-disposed towards morality, which makes it necessary that they receive some sort of pedagogical, preparatory guidance in becoming moral agents. The ready recognition of the fallibility of moral pursuits – not in the least because of the demanding nature of the moral law – can incline moral despair. In order to counteract such moral despair, Kant recognized that human beings require certain practices that can appeal and cultivate moral courage in the face of potential despair. Kantian hope counteracts despair.

This means that religion has its ground in something that is not purely rational. In fact, religion emerges in response to those elements in humanity that would object to rationality. There is an extralogical component to human beings, conceptualized by Kant in his *Hang zum Böse*, that necessitates the appeal to something beyond rationality. While this is not the place to make such sweeping claims, such a reading of Kant's philosophy of religion could clarify how certain aspects of Romantic philosophy have decisive Kantian pedigree. For instance, Schopenhauer's pessimism might then be an enlarging mirror for Kant's great discovery that human being intimately rebel against rationality.¹²

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¹¹ For more on the relationship of the aesthetic sublime to the moral good: Clewis 2009, pp. 126-135.

¹² I have discussed this point extensively in Vanden Auwee, 2017.

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